

Wittgenstein's Employment of the Private Language Argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*

William Voelker
Gustavus Adolphus College

*I saw this guy on the train / And he seemed to have gotten stuck / In one of those
abstract trances. / And he was going: "Ugh... Ugh... Ugh..." And Fred said: /
"I think he's in some kind of pain. / I think it's a pain cry." / And I said: "Pain
cry? / Then language is a virus." Language! It's a virus! / Language! It's a
virus!*

— Laurie Anderson, *Language is a Virus*

*this paper is written with the anticipation of the reader having a
basic knowledge of wittgenstein's philosophy. this frees me from
having to define terms and waste space (and thereby limiting the
reader with my definitions. their understanding of the topics will
be read into the paper regardless of the safeguards i place on it
with definitions and handholding, but i find this to be a good
thing, as the number of interpretations of my point may grow
then, and the differences will be over the argument itself and not
the terms which surround it. don't discuss the depth grammar
within the game.) much of what i am going to say will seem
obvious, but sometimes the obvious is what is overlooked. by the
way: i'm not using private language here (though i am writing it
to myself— in English).*

I. Private Language

1. Isolating the Private Language Argument is like removing a stone from a wall, then pointing to the stone and saying "This is a wall." Exposing the Private Language Argument is like pointing at a stone in a wall and saying "This is part of a wall." The difference is that one remains grounded in its place, and the place defines it—it is recognized in its relation to the place. The other is seen without a context. Without the place, it is senseless.¹

¹ I am in agreement with Kripke when he says "...we will only increase our difficult argument if we call §243 onward 'the private language argument' and study it in isolation from the preceding material" (Kripke, p. 81). However, this is not to say it should not be done to understand its place in the work as a whole. If it is done to separate it from the rest of the work: that is where the problem lies. However, Kripke makes this mistake himself: he discusses the private language argument in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages* while ignoring the preceding statements and paragraphs in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He does not take his own advice and warnings.

The Private Language Argument is Wittgenstein's attack on traditional philosophical methods and philosophical language-games,² and his attempt to show their lack of meaning and sense. He was striking at the roots of the philosophical project as it had grown over the past 2,500 years or so, attempting to prune it back so it could grow strong this time, and not twisted and weak, as he saw it to be. He exposed the propensity of philosophers to argue over points which are not applicable to much of anything,³ and how they do not seem to be in contact with the real world, and would prefer to believe their theories rather than what they had seen.⁴ Wittgenstein was able to use it as both an argument to support his stand on the other topics he discusses in the *Philosophical Investigations* and as an example of the problems he was attacking.

2. Private Language: what is it, and how does it relate to the rest of Wittgenstein? This is the question that must first be investigated when we discuss private language as discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Without an understanding of how it relates to the rest of the text, the argument is left suspended from nothing. The supports from a structure must not be removed: they then become useless (they aren't supporting anything) and the structure will collapse. Using the supports in another structure can be done only if a) the structure is designed to incorporate the support, or, b) the support is modified to work within the structure. The Private Language Argument, I hold, only fits within Wittgenstein's overall structure when left unmodified. Even if the supports are removed to study it, unless one knows how it works with the rest of the structure it will be unclear as to what it does exactly. It is only effective *as it is* within the environment that was created for it. Therefore, the Private Language Argument *cannot* be removed from the *Philosophical Investigations* and stand on its own, just as the surface grammar of a language game cannot be seen out of context and still be intelligible. *Ex.*: You are sitting in a room and you hear snippets of

²Including his Theory of Language in the *Tractatus*, and the rest of the *Tractatus* also. He is not simply going after other philosophers: he is going after himself in the past, and that past self was a traditional philosopher to the core—an obvious target for him to go after.

³Witness the "Angels on the Head of a Pin" debate which was once so popular in philosophical circles, but has now been superseded by relativism and SuperSkepticism: how many ways can we look at something without seeing it?

⁴See: *Skepticism*

conversation coming out of the next room. To speculate on the meaning of these snippets is nearly impossible, as you are hearing them out of context, and are not actively in the game.⁵ The following illustration pictures how Language Games can be compared to the use of the Private Language Argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein's use of the Private Language Argument is subtle. His use is careful and planned, and 1) it holds a central place in the construction of his book, taking up a great deal of space (both physically and idea-wise), and 2) it is one of his central arguments in his assault on the *Tractatus*. It is both interesting and important to note that he did not mark it off as a separate chapter or section. He left it in as part of the rest of the text, flowing right along with it (no breaks allowed), further backing up my claim (textually) that the argument cannot stand on its own as it is senseless on its own. Both the form of the text and its content lead me to believe this. *Ex.*: consider how the *Tractatus* would read if one of the sections were removed.

3. The Language itself... what language games could exist in a private language? How would the grammar hold together? It seems to me from reading *On Certainty* that as our experiences are what we can base our thinking upon, our experiences show us that language is a group activity. There is *no need whatsoever* for a private language, as one would not have to tell oneself something: one *is aware*:

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour,—for *I* cannot be said to learn of them. *I have* them.
(PI, §246)

The question is complete nonsense if one thinks of the idea of language being learned and then *later* the question pops up: it is never there to begin with, but comes back later: it is a *philosophical* question. It is not a thinking question. It leads to statements (said in all sincerity and honesty) such as "I know that is a tree." These statements are said as if they prove something or verify something, as if they proved what was said or that they mean more than they say. They are not treated as they actually function in reality: as statements attempting to reference the depth grammar. There is no need to

⁵ To be actively in a language game does not require one to be actively involved but to simply know what the game is. That is why it is so hard to break into the middle of a conversation and still be able to make intelligible comments or to enter the flow of the dialogue.

reference the depth grammar (it is there, it is a given in the game), but as that is being done, the statement can only function as a statement and not as a proposition. Are either necessary when one deals with oneself, when one talks to oneself? Would the language one uses in discussing matters with oneself be the same as the language used when discussing matters with others who speak the same language? One does not need to tell oneself the statements (just as they are unnecessary in a language game) and one does not need to deliberate with oneself in a language, and if one does, it is my experience that *intuition* plays a key role in the process, and if the deliberation is done with language, we take two sides, we deliberate with ourselves with us taking both the *self* and other places in the argument.⁶

4. §256—"But suppose I didn't have any natural expression for the sensation, but only had the sensation?" (PI). If there is no *natural expression*, i.e., language in common with other people, does that mean that a private language is *not* a natural expression for Wittgenstein? I think so. A private language is *terribly* unnatural.⁷

5. Why is it that Wittgenstein seems to feel a need for some sort of logical argument vs. private language when he seems to have a common sense argument in his other arguments?⁸ Perhaps he is anticipating those who want the philosophical answer. §275 seems to me to be a cutting comment:

275. Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself "How blue the sky is!"—When you do it spontaneously—without philosophical intentions—the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to *you*. And you have no hesitation in exclaiming that to someone else. And if you point at anything as you say the words you point at the sky. I am saying: you have not the feeling of pointing-into-yourself, which often accompanies 'naming the sensation' when one is thinking about 'private language.' Nor do you think that really you ought not to point to the color with your hand, but with your attention. (Consider what it means "to point to something with the attention.") (PI)

⁶Can it be otherwise, and if so, does it remain deliberation?

⁷To not have a "natural expression for a sensation" is to be Ayer's Crusoe—but not on Ayer's terms. This is Ayer's Crusoe on Wittgenstein's terms. A question is left to be answered: is a man without language truly a human for Wittgenstein?

⁸Albeit his is an extremely *logical* common sense argument, but is it then still common sense?

II. The Private Language Argument

6. "5.6 *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (TL-P).⁹ In the early Wittgenstein, a private language limits the world to what is sensed.¹⁰ This removes the outer language, as the private language would constrain the outer language, and one could not express anything in the outer language that could not be expressed in the private language. The private language would have to be extraordinarily complex for a person to communicate with others if this would be the case.¹¹ The communication between the public and private: would there not be something lost between the two? (Isn't there anyway?)

"5.62... The world is *my world*: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my world*" (TL-P). These are the beginnings of the problem.¹²

7. §243— You can talk to yourself, but in what language is that discussion? My experience shows me I talk to myself in English, my native tongue. If I used a private language, would I not have to translate everything between the two if I wanted to communicate with someone else? Also: why would one want to have a language to use with *oneself* about something one already knows (though, as Wittgenstein states, you do not *know* you are in pain, you simply *are*), that is, the sensations?

8. §246—"The truth is: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself" (PI). Language is communication, not only of thoughts and arguments but of information: there is no need to communicate information with oneself—discuss, deliberate, debate, those can (and should) be done, but to communicate information one has with oneself is nonsensical. One cannot doubt the information one has (the veracity of it, perhaps) but not *what* it is, as in the case of sensations. You do not know, you have.¹³

⁹ Does this imply that I cannot expand my world without expanding my language? Can we not sense or respond to something if we do not have it in our language?

¹⁰ Is reading sensing?

¹¹ A person would have to have a rich private language and an amazing amount of sensations *allowed by their private language* if they were to communicate those experiences with others or they would be in danger of continually being passed over in silence/passing over in silence.

¹² If it wasn't for 5.62 in the *TL-P*, Wittgenstein might not have had this to deal with, I'd imagine.

¹³ §249—Lying? Lie to yourself in your own private language? "(Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one)" (PI). If this is true, where did one learn to lie to oneself?

9. I believe that I have covered enough of the argument to illustrate my point. Wittgenstein is illustrating his argument with illustrated arguments. He has shown how traditional philosophy asks needless questions that cause far more problems than they start. The debate over "can there be a Private Language?" is silly (Wittgenstein knows this) as the questions are *philosophical*, and are not asked except by immature minds (OC, §§310-317). Questions about things one cannot doubt (Am I feeling this feeling I feel right now?) are meaningless.

10. To Recapitulate/Restate/ Add: If the Private Language argument is taken out of context, taken out of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the "Depth Grammar" of the argument (the rest of the book) is ignored, and therefore the argument itself is without any relevance whatsoever. The argument must be taken *in context*, and if it is not, the argument is either unintelligible, because of the missing depth grammar (a fish out of water) or it means something completely different than it originally did due to *new* depth grammar surrounding it.

III. Private Relations

*If language were liquid / It would be rushing in / Instead here we are / In silence
more eloquent / Than any word could ever be*

...

*Words are too solid / They don't move fast enough / To catch the blur in the
brain / That flies by and is gone / Gone / Gone / Gone
I'd like to meet you / In a timeless / Placeless place / Somewhere out of context /
And beyond all consequences*

...

*I won't use words again / They don't mean what I meant / They don't say what I
said / They're just the crust of the meaning / With realms underneath
/ Never touched / Never stirred / Never even moved through*

—Suzanne Vega, *Language*

11. Suppose I tell someone who has never read any Wittgenstein about the Private Language Argument. Their first reaction will be "That is silly. There is no reason for an argument *against* private language, as there cannot be one. I do not have one, and have never met anyone claiming to have one." Wittgenstein makes a good argument against private language (as shown earlier) but his prime argument is not against private language, but against *philosophy*. He also says (essentially) "This (the Private Language idea) is

silly, "but "This" is both Private Language *and* Philosophy for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein wants thinking, not incoherent questions/discussions.¹⁴

12. "Meaningless" A Private Language would be meaningless even if there was one—consider how, as Wittgenstein points out, I do not say, "I know I have a pain" in order to let myself know—I simply *have* the pain. See §246 as this is so—why would we have a personal language to discuss our sensations with ourselves? "Oh I think that hurts—let me check—oh yes, I feel *S*." It does not work that way. We feel it—and do we discuss the pain with ourselves? No. We discuss *eliminating* it—in fact, I would not call it "discussing"—we run over a list of possible responses to the pain we have built up over time to deal with pain, gained from our experiences. Discussion comes when we deal with someone else. We only deliberate in conscious language over something when we are planning to express it to someone else. We have no need to explain it to ourselves. The raw data our minds deal with is not kept from our minds by a private language—our minds deal directly with it. This is what makes expressing our feelings so hard—we feel, and as we do not have an inner language, we must take the raw data and *move* it into the language we wish to express ourselves in. If we did not, we could translate between our inner language and the outer one we speak. But there is no need to. What we lose in meaning we gain in speed. To act quickly means that our processing time must be kept to a minimum. A language between us and our sense would mean we could not react quickly.¹⁵

13. A.J. Ayer, for example, lifts the Private Language Argument directly out of the *Philosophical Investigations* in his essay "Can There Be a Private Language?" and seems to understand it in terms of a language used for communication between entities, for he says "...it is obvious that there can be private languages. There can be, because there are" (Pitcher, p. 250). He immediately assumes the existence of such a language, which makes him at once unable to see Wittgenstein's point clearly. He says:

¹⁴ Here we have found the reason for the Private Language argument (and his later works): this work is *against philosophy*. Remember the philosopher pointing at the tree and saying "I know that's a tree."

¹⁵ However: could the basis of language be hard-wired into us, and the language we speak simply be the program we run on top of it?

It is, however, possible that a very secretive diarist may not be satisfied with putting familiar words into an unfamiliar notation, but may prefer to invent new words: the two processes are in any case not sharply distinct. If he carries his invention far enough he can properly be said to be employing a private language (Pitcher, p. 250).

Ayer is standing in the camp of the Ostensive Definitioners when he makes this statement. He sees naming and words as the starting point of language. What he fails to see, however, is that the "private" language the diarist develops is developed from and takes the place of the original language he speaks: this is not a private language, but a new language that has another language for a background. It could easily (as much as learning a language is easy) be learned by someone else. A couple of questions arise: Wittgenstein's "S" diary: Why? This is a simple question. Why would one use a private language rather than the language used already by the person to mark when a feeling is felt, or some other private action occurs? This serves no purpose, other than to make a list (as if one would do this for a doctor or a class, reports, etc.), and is in essence a meaningless activity. To see the end of it all for Ayer: he comes down to descriptions and descriptive language—in effect, you need descriptions of things, even for yourself, and the language is the key to the description. Each name is related to a description. The names must be removed, says Wittgenstein: Ostensive Definitions cause far more problems than they are worth. Ayer does not see that in order to attach a description to a name one cannot just name first: one must be able to articulate the description; i.e., one must have a language that name and description fit into. The structures must be there in the first place, or there is nowhere for a word or definition to reside. Naming is a part of the bigger language: language does not come from naming.

To Conclude:

Ayer missed the point by a long shot. He¹⁶ has removed (Isolated) the argument and is treating it as if it can be separated from the rest of the *Philosophical Investigations*. He does not see the rest of the forest and is liable to brain himself if he is not careful. Wittgenstein was *illustrating* and using the argument to strengthen the rest of his thesis—he never intended for

¹⁶ Ayer is not the philosopher looking at the tree and saying "I know that is a tree." Instead, he says, "That is a tree" "that is grass" "That is sky."

it to gain a life of its own.¹⁷ This again shows how philosophers have a habit of philosophical thinking, not of *real* thinking.¹⁸ Ayer is exactly what Wittgenstein is fighting: the philosopher who putters about in meaningless philosophical language games.¹⁹

Alice thought to herself, "Then there's no use in speaking." The voices didn't join in this time, as she hadn't spoken, but, to her great surprise, they all *thought* in chorus (I hope you understand what *thinking in chorus* means—for I must confess that I don't), "Better say nothing at all. Language is worth a thousand pounds a word!"

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

¹⁷ Wittgenstein touched Philosophy's collective nerve when he brought up this subject. Why is Private Language something that is fought over? *What does it matter?* I believe that Wittgenstein *knew* how other philosophers would react to his ideas. To him the argument was support for his thesis and not much else. For other philosophers, it became their route to employment... *What does it matter?* is an enquiry that must eventually be made so we can better know the psychology of philosophers (*note*: psychology makes the same mistakes as philosophy).

¹⁸ Remember the language game: context (depth grammar) controls the meaning. By removing the argument, the depth grammar is ignored, and the argument has no sense in its *original* sense. I do not know if Wittgenstein would say it has *any* sense at all.

¹⁹ What of "Words we cannot say?" When we know something, and understand it—we sometimes cannot express it in the language we *speak*. This implies a problem with our spoken language.

Works Cited

- Kripke, Saul A. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Pitcher, George, ed. *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
- [OC] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. G.E.M. Anscombe and Wright, G.H., eds. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- [PI] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1968.
- [TL-P] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Tr. by D.F. Pears and McGuinness, B.F. Cornwall, Great Britain: Routledge Humanities Press International Inc., 1988.